

Honor Among Crooks: The Role of Trust in Obfuscated Disreputable Exchange

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ABSTRACT

When people want to conduct a transaction, but doing so would be morally disreputable, they can obfuscate the fact that they are engaging in an exchange while still arranging for a set of transfers that are effectively equivalent to an exchange. Obfuscation through structures such as gift giving and brokerage is pervasive across a wide range of disreputable exchanges, such as bribery and sex work. In this paper, we develop a theoretical account that sheds light on when actors are more versus less likely to obfuscate. Specifically, we report a series of experiments addressing the effect of trust on the decision to engage in obfuscated disreputable exchange. We find that actors obfuscate more often with exchange partners high in loyalty-based trustworthiness, with expected reciprocity and moral discomfort mediating this effect. However, the effect is highly contingent on the type of trust; trust facilitates obfuscation when it is loyalty-based, but this effect flips when trust is ethics-based. Our findings not only offer insights into the important role of relational context in shaping moral understandings and choices about disreputable exchange but also contribute to scholarship on trust by demonstrating that distinct forms of trust can have diametrically opposed effects.

Keywords: obfuscation, trust, economic sociology, bribery, vignette experiment

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INTRODUCTION

When someone is kidnapped for ransom, employers, loved ones, insurance companies, and governments may find themselves reluctantly trading with pirates, gangsters, or terrorists. Paying a ransom may be better than a dead hostage but is considered disreputable as it rewards criminals, encourages more kidnappings, and in some cases finances terrorism. Faced with a ransom demand, one has three choices: refuse it (and end up with a dead hostage), pay it (and face reputational and legal risks), or find a way to pay without paying overtly (and get the hostage back while avoiding shame). Illustrating this last option, “some [European] governments prefer that negotiations are conducted at arm’s length by a regional power-broker—who may be *officially* instructed not to pay a ransom” [emphasis added] (Shortland 2019:205). For instance, the Malian government has served as a ransom broker and been compensated with “development aid,” thereby allowing the hostage’s government to save face by not overtly paying ransoms. Trust is the lubricant that makes the otherwise impossibly sticky situation of hostage negotiation operate smoothly. Hostage takers develop track records for reliability and releasing hostages once demands are met, and hostage negotiators convey this reputational information. Indirect means of compensation and trustworthiness reputations are both key to getting hostages home safely.

The market has widely understood boundaries of what belongs within commerce and what outside of it. The relational work tradition of economic sociology draws attention to how people can and do buy things that they know they ought not, but sometimes they mitigate the potential self-reproach, reputational damage, or legal problems by doing so in subtle ways, thus concealing the transactional nature of the transfer of contested goods (Zelizer 2005). Obfuscated disreputable exchange can be defined as “arranging a set of transfers so as to obscure the fact

that a disreputable exchange is occurring” (Schilke and Rossman 2018:1080). Obfuscation turns prostitution into sugar daddy-ism, political bribery into campaign contributions, usury into bay' al-'inah, etc. (Rossman 2014). Transforming a transaction into a non-transactional set of transfers mitigates the problem of morally indignant third parties, but it introduces a new problem that by forgoing an overt quid pro quo structure, one is forgoing market institutions and otherwise introducing social uncertainty about the counterpart's propensity to reciprocate. This suggests that trust will be key to explaining when people choose to subtly purchase nonmarket goods, such as by structuring a bribe as a gift.

While the economic sociology of obfuscation has produced insights into the sensemaking of the actors involved (Hoang 2018, Mears 2020) as well as the moral judgment of audiences (Amengual and Bartley 2022, Guo and Xu 2022), it has yet to delve deeper into the conceptually distinct issue of actors' decision of whether or not to engage in obfuscation in the first place. This involves a moral consideration: “Will I be ashamed to engage in an obfuscated disreputable exchange?” But it also raises a pragmatic question: “Will I actually receive the goods or services I sought?” For instance, a man might seek sex by acting the part of a sugar daddy and accept the milder shame this implies than being a john, but he might worry that the sugar baby could fail to reciprocate his expenditures with sex. This paper tackles these issues and aims to develop a deeper understanding of actors' choice to practice obfuscated disreputable exchange. Building on the idea that obfuscation involves considerable social uncertainty about reciprocity, we advance the economic sociology of disreputable exchange by identifying the exchange partner's trustworthiness as a key driver for this choice.

Trust is one of the most important phenomena across the social sciences, ranging from sociology (Cook 2001, Lewis and Weigert 1985) and psychology (Kramer 1999, Rotter 1967) to

economics (Algan and Cahuc 2013, Arrow 1974) and political science (Fukuyama 1995, Levi and Stoker 2000). We contribute to the literature on trust in three ways. First, we demonstrate the effect of a partner’s trustworthiness on the choice to engage in obfuscated disreputable exchange—and reveal that trustworthiness is particularly critical for facilitating obfuscation. The finding that trustworthiness promotes a form of disreputable exchange goes against the overwhelmingly positive orientation of the trust literature, which has generally emphasized the benefits of trust (Schilke, Reimann, and Cook 2021), consistent with the “sociological bias to see good things emerging out of sociability” (Portes 1998:15). As such, our investigation adds to the understanding of the dark side of trust (Gargiulo and Ertug 2006, Neal, Shockley, and Schilke 2015, Yenkey 2018) by highlighting that trust can also have the downside of facilitating obfuscated disreputable exchange. Second, we show that expected reciprocity and moral discomfort act as mediating mechanisms through which trustworthiness affects exchange structure choice, thus adding to knowledge of how trust translates into social behavior. Finally, while most of the sociological literature on trust is implicitly about loyalty-based trustworthiness, we disambiguate trustworthiness into loyalty and ethical dimensions and show that they have opposite effects on the willingness to engage in obfuscated disreputable exchange.

The rest of this article begins with a theoretical review of the economic sociology of obfuscated disreputable exchange. We then describe the social scientific understanding of trust and synthesize these two literatures to derive seven hypotheses on how different forms and levels of trustworthiness should affect the decision to engage in obfuscated disreputable exchange. In our empirical section, we present five pre-registered vignette experiments that test these hypotheses as well as five exploratory studies demonstrating robustness. Finally, the paper

concludes with implications for the situational nature of moral reasoning and the importance of disambiguating types of trustworthiness.

OBFUSCATION

A fundamental scope condition for trading in markets is what sorts of goods and services are culturally acceptable to treat as commodities. If a culture objects to such transactions as prostitution and political bribery, it does not find them disreputable because of the goods they involve, since there are inoffensive ways for people to have sex or petition for regulatory approval. Nor are economic transactions offensive per se, as nobody finds it immoral to buy a cup of coffee. Rather, disreputable exchange describes market exchange of nonmarket goods: that is, those products and services for which it is a moral necessity to transfer them via logics other than markets.¹ For instance, sex is usually understood as characterized by a logic of love, or at least mutual desire, rather than as a commodity. Of course, that it is distasteful, unethical, or scandalous to commensurate a sacred good with profane money does not mean that people never buy or sell it. There will inevitably be cases when one party has a good and another party desires that good and is willing to pay for it, and so the parties buy and sell the good, notwithstanding a widespread understanding that this transaction is illegitimate. Indeed, there is a substantial body of literature in sociology and allied fields on disreputable exchange and repugnant commensuration (Healy and Krawiec 2017, Krawiec 2009, Roth 2007, Wherry 2010, Zelizer 1983, Zelizer 2005).

A growing literature within economic sociology addresses the question of obfuscation, or how actors mitigate the moral disapproval attached to a disreputable exchange by restructuring it not as an economic transaction but as something else (Guo and Xu 2022, Hoang 2018, Mears

2015, Mears 2020, Rossman 2014). For instance, in gift exchange, one party gives a gift to the other, and at some later date the second party gives a gift to the first, thereby obfuscating that the counter-gift is in effect being exchanged for the initial gift (Bourdieu 2000). One notable case is pharma detailing, in which pharmaceutical companies give gifts to doctors and doctors reciprocate by prescribing drugs, even when these drugs provide minimal advantages over cheaper generics (King et al. 2013, King and Bearman 2017). The key feature distinguishing gift exchange from market transactions is that in gift exchange reciprocity can only be expected, not enforced. Gift exchange's sublimated commensuration is useful for achieving obfuscation if the gift and counter-gift are goods that cannot be traded legitimately. Similarly, in brokerage, the person seeking a nonmarket good relies on a broker to pay for the good, and the fact that A pays B who pays C who gives a nonmarket good to A obfuscates that A is buying a nonmarket good from C. These obfuscations create plausible deniability that the market good is being commensurated with the nonmarket good since, for instance, I may give you a gift because I like you and not because I am hoping for a counter-gift. Overall, the concept of structural obfuscation offers an important extension of earlier accounts of incommensurable goods (Bohannan 1955, Bourdieu 2000, Sandel 2000, Walzer 1983, Zelizer 2005) by emphasizing that cultural understandings of the moral acceptability of exchanging goods are not only a function of the type of good but also of how the exchange is structured (Schilke and Rossman 2018).

The economic sociology of obfuscated disreputable exchange has explored a variety of substantive topics. Mears (2015, 2020) describes a complex system surrounding night club bottle service with promoters acting as brokers who rely on gift exchange to recruit models to hang out at clubs that bundle their company with overpriced drinks; all of which serves to obfuscate the fact that rich men are (very indirectly) paying for models to serve as arm candy. Hoang (2018)

shows how developers in Vietnamese real estate use different types of obfuscation, ranging from gifting designer handbags to hiring the children of public officials to working with politically connected law firms who broker payments.² Guo and Xu (2022) emphasize the element of tact and social class in “red envelope” side payments to doctors for concierge-level medical treatment in China. Jia, Markus, and Werner (2023) analyze how firms conceal their lobbying activities by outsourcing them to intermediaries or misrepresenting them in publicized statements, thus making it more difficult for audiences to recognize the link between the firm and the lobbying activity. Chen and Berman (2022) shed light on how audiences’ social position shapes their judgment of different types of brokered exchange in Taiwan’s educational consulting industry. The framework can even be extended to understand deliberately obscuring economic interactions other than transactions in nonmarket goods. For instance, panhandlers may obfuscate begging as an offer to perform petty services (Patrick 2018), and people find ways to obfuscate refusal of socially obligated gifts or loans to deadbeat friends or relatives (Wherry, Seefeldt, and Alvarez 2019).

A burgeoning research stream based on vignette experiments exploring audience perception of obfuscation complements the qualitative literature’s rich ethnographic and historical detail. Schilke and Rossman (2018) demonstrate that obfuscation reduces the moral indignation of third parties to political bribery, commercial bribery, and baby-selling, but obfuscation remains more distasteful to these audiences than avoiding these transactions altogether. Amengual and Bartley (2022) show that subjects are less likely to demand government regulation in response to corporate malfeasance if the misdeeds were perpetrated by a subcontractor (i.e., brokerage obfuscation). Note that these experimental studies regard third-person understandings. That is, the experimental studies tell participants a story about other

people engaging in a certain transaction and ask their opinion about this transaction, but they do not put the participants in the position of choosing how to behave in a possible transaction themselves. The experimental literature has thus demonstrated how audiences regard exchange but has yet to examine the participants' perspective when facing the option to pursue or refuse a potential disreputable exchange, particularly in an obfuscated form. A major aim of this paper is to fill this lacuna and show under what circumstances people will choose obfuscated disreputable exchange.

Importantly, obfuscation not only makes disreputable exchange appear more palatable but also transforms exchange in ways that make it more opaque and less enforceable, even to the participants of the exchange themselves. In other words, obfuscation is high in social uncertainty, conceptualized as a situation in which actors need information about their partner's intentions but this type of information is lacking (Yamagishi 2011). In particular, an obfuscating actor faces high social uncertainty as to whether the exchange partner will reciprocate. If obfuscation involves substantial uncertainty for the parties involved, they may refrain from choosing this structure unless uncertainty can be effectively addressed.

TRUST AND OBFUSCATED DISREPUTABLE EXCHANGE

Trust is a key mechanism for mitigating social uncertainty (Blau 1964, Luhmann 1979). As a result, trust tends to be comparatively more relevant in explaining relational behavior when social uncertainty is high (Deutsch 1958) and actors face a risk of being exploited by their partners (Yamagishi, Cook, and Watabe 1998). If the partner has an incentive to act opportunistically and the actor cannot be sure whether the partner will cooperate or defect (i.e., high social uncertainty), then the actor's behavior will be highly dependent on the degree to

which he or she trusts that partner. In contrast, if the situation precludes the possibility of cheating (i.e., low social uncertainty), then trust has comparatively little explanatory power regarding actors' behavior (Foddy and Yamagishi 2009). As such, the inability to enforce reciprocity through assurance constitutes a scope condition to theories of trust (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994) and our model proposed here.

Although there is no single consensus definition, sociologists often conceptualize trust as a state in which “one party to the relation believes the other party has incentive to act in his or her interest or to take his or her interests to heart” (Cook, Hardin, and Levi 2005:2; also see Granovetter 2017:58, Molm, Schaefer, and Collett 2009:6). This definition emphasizes the partner's perceived trustworthiness—and in particular their loyalty, understood as relational faithfulness and goodwill—as a fundamental requirement for trust to arise (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995, Sztompka 1999). If I feel confident that you are inclined to be loyal to me and care about my interests, then this will increase my willingness to trust you. A positive estimate of loyalty-based trustworthiness will thus elicit trusting behavior by “acting in a way that leaves one open to exploitation” (Simpson and Willer 2015:48).

Trust is a central topic in economic sociology and social psychology alike. For example, trust is the essential mechanism in Granovetter's (1985) notion of economic embeddedness, which highlights that people have a strong preference to deal with others they trust. Along similar lines, Coleman (1988) stresses that trust represents a key component of social capital in that it gives rise to expectations that other people will repay their obligations. Among social psychologists, Blau (1964) was one of the first to describe how trust tends to originate in a history of recurrent social interactions and to gradually evolve in a self-amplifying fashion, such that trust creates an opportunity for an exchange partner to demonstrate their trustworthiness,

which leads to greater reliance on trust in the next interaction, and so on (also see Kuwabara and Sheldon 2012). Similarly, Cook (2001) understands trust as grounded in either first-hand or reputational information about a counterpart and a critical basis for social exchange.

Much of the literature has pointed to various positive outcomes associated with trust, including its ability to spur cooperation (Fukuyama 1995, Putnam 1995) and reduce transaction costs (Dyer and Chu 2003, Uzzi 1997) and its broader importance as “an important lubricant of a social system” (Arrow 1974:23). Socially undesirable consequences of trust, sometimes referred to as the dark side of trust (Gargiulo and Ertug 2006, Neal et al. 2015, Yenkey 2018), have received relatively less attention in the sociological trust literature, despite repeated calls for their investigation (Schilke et al. 2021, Sztompka 1999).

We address this gap by building on the general notion that trust can be especially important for governing illegitimate transactions (Gambetta 1993, Smith and Papachristos 2016) and specifically by investigating how trust can facilitate obfuscated disreputable exchange.³ For instance, trust may be a key enabler of corruption (Lomnitz 1988), which tends to be fraught with uncertainty because an actor cannot rely on the state to enforce their co-conspirator’s behavior (Lambsdorff 2002, Rose-Ackerman 2001). Further, the risk of getting caught and being sanctioned is substantial, producing a need for secrecy (Lawler and Hipp 2010) and thus bolstering the relevance of trust in corrupt exchange. Consequently, trusting that one’s partner will not blow the whistle facilitates corrupt exchange.

We propose that social uncertainty—and, by implication, the relevance of trust and trustworthiness—is further amplified when a disreputable exchange is structurally obfuscated. Specifically, obfuscation is characterized by higher levels of uncertainty than a quid pro quo disreputable exchange or, for that matter, refusing a disreputable exchange altogether. By

obscuring what is being exchanged, obfuscation is all about raising ambiguity (Deener 2017, Stivers, Rossi, and Chalfoun forthcoming), not only for its audience but also for the actors themselves (Fridman and Luscombe 2017, Rossman 2014). For example, the discretionary character inherent in gift exchange introduces the possibility that a counterpart may ultimately fail to reciprocate (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000, Molm, Takahashi, and Peterson 2000). Furthermore, the time delay that characterizes gift exchange opens uncertainty as to whether reciprocity is never to be achieved or merely right-censored, and this very uncertainty is what makes a gift a gift (Bourdieu 1990). Fittingly, most insider trading seems to be based on eliciting gift exchange reciprocity within high-trust relationships (Ahern 2017). Similarly, brokerage involves a delegation of authority (Gould and Fernandez 1989), which creates considerable social uncertainty. While the involvement of an intermediary may help to conceal the disreputable exchange, it also creates distance between, and thus social uncertainty for, ego and alter. In contrast, refusing disreputable exchange is considerably less ambiguous and risky. And the simultaneous and explicit nature of a *quid pro quo*, in which partners mutually agree upon terms, involves lower levels of social uncertainty (Molm et al. 2000) than an otherwise similar obfuscated exchange. When transaction terms are made explicit, economic self-interest and calculation tend to play a key role, whereas trust considerations are pushed to the background (Chan 2009). This position is consistent with Hoang (2018), who pointed to a strong pattern of cultural proximity structuring disreputable exchange, and although cultural proximity is not synonymous with loyalty-based trustworthiness, the two concepts are plausibly related (Nilsson 2019).

For these reasons, we submit that greater trust, grounded in the partner's perceived loyalty-based trustworthiness, raises the likelihood that an actor will choose to obfuscate a

disreputable exchange, regardless of whether the alternative is only to refuse a disreputable exchange (H1) or the actor has three choices: obfuscation, refusal, or an overt quid pro quo (H2).

Thus:

Hypothesis 1: An exchange partner high in loyalty-based trustworthiness makes it more likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange.

Hypothesis 2: An exchange partner high in loyalty-based trustworthiness makes it more likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than (a) refuse disreputable exchange or (b) choose quid pro quo.

To add greater theoretical insight into the specific mechanisms through which trust shapes exchange structures, we turn to possible mediators of the relationship between loyalty-based trustworthiness perceptions and the choice between obfuscation and refusal.⁴ For this purpose, we propose a mediated model in which perceived trustworthiness operates to a considerable extent through two intervening processes, namely expected reciprocity and moral discomfort.

First, we suggest that loyalty-based trustworthiness may raise expectations of reciprocity—that is, the perceived likelihood that the counterpart will provide benefits in return to benefits received (Gouldner 1960, Molm 2010). The encapsulated interest account of trust (Cook et al. 2005, Hardin 2002, Hardin 2006) suggests that, when there is reason to believe a counterpart is motivated to care about the trustor's interests in the relationship (i.e., be high in loyalty-based trustworthiness), this counterpart is expected not to behave opportunistically and instead to honor the trust placed in them by reciprocating. This view is consistent with the notion that people tend to attribute reciprocity to the counterpart's benign intent and reliability (Simpson and Willer 2015), which are at the heart of loyalty-based trustworthiness perceptions. To the extent that a partner is expected to reciprocate, actors will be more inclined to choose an

obfuscated exchange structure. As we argued above, obfuscation is characterized by considerable social uncertainty and the possibility of cheating; as such, actors will be more prone to engage in this structure when they expect their partner to reciprocate. Taken together, this line of argument suggests that expected reciprocity will mediate the effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on the choice of obfuscation over refusal.

Hypothesis 3: Expected reciprocity mediates the positive effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on obfuscation (vs. refusing disreputable exchange), such that loyalty-based trustworthiness increases expected reciprocity and expected reciprocity in turn makes it more likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange.

Second, we argue that loyalty-based trustworthiness may favor obfuscated exchange because it can alleviate moral discomfort, understood as negative affect associated with morally inappropriate action (Haidt 2003). Most people hold morality close to their understanding of self, such that anticipated disreputable action deviating from this moral self-view may cause dissonance and distress (Blasi 1983). For such discomfort to arise, however, individuals need to perceive the action as morally problematic (Rest 1986). Although intuitively the morality of an action should be independent of one's trust in those who might witness or collaborate in it, we argue there is reason to believe that a relational context characterized by high levels of loyalty-based trust may mitigate subjective moral concern. Interpersonal trust is often associated with enhanced feelings of psychological safety and the assumption that the counterpart will not express negative judgment (Edmondson 1999, Schaubroeck, Lam, and Peng 2011), which may reduce potential doubts and worries about moral correctness. Because trusted others will be more likely to support one's proposed actions, it is less likely they will voice moral disapproval (Narayanan, Ronson, and Pillutla 2006). Therefore, actors in high-trust relationships may be less prone to critically examine their proposed actions, including these actions' moral dimension.

Given the anticipated absence of doubts expressed by their loyal counterpart, actors may not even be aware their proposed exchange may be considered immoral, making it more likely that they will choose an obfuscated disreputable exchange. Conversely, actors facing a counterpart they do not perceive as allegiant expect relatively less support for and greater scrutiny of their proposed action, increasing the possibility that the action may be condemned as immoral, and anticipating this criticism raises the salience of moral concerns. As such, to the extent that high trust helps to attenuate moral discomfort, this reduced moral discomfort makes it more likely that actors will pursue (rather than refuse) an obfuscated disreputable exchange.

Hypothesis 4: Moral discomfort mediates the positive effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on obfuscation (vs. refusing disreputable exchange), such that loyalty-based trustworthiness decreases moral discomfort and moral discomfort in turn makes it less likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange.

So far, we have focused on the dominant sociological conceptualization of trust as originating in the perception of a counterpart's loyalty (Schilke et al. 2021). However, loyalty is not the only basis of perceived trustworthiness; another source of trustworthiness perceptions is that a counterpart is considered to be ethical (Colquitt and Rodell 2011, Tyler 1989, Tyler 1994). Ethical trust is the primary interpretation of the concept "trust" in development economics and political science, which have noted robust associations between high trust, high economic growth, and low rates of various forms of unethical behavior (see Algan and Cahuc 2013, Uslaner 2002 for reviews). Whereas loyalty-based trustworthiness emphasizes positive intentions and a desire to help the trustor, ethics-based trustworthiness refers to the perception that a counterpart is committed to an acceptable set of principles, most notably rectitude and truthfulness (Colquitt, Scott, and LePine 2007, Elsbach and Currall 2012, Mayer et al. 1995).⁵ If

an exchange partner is high in perceived ethicality and thus expected to adhere to socially valued rules and norms, this partner tends to be viewed as trustworthy (Potter 2002).

Our distinction between loyalty- and ethics-based trustworthiness parallels Mayer et al.'s (1995) discussion of benevolence and integrity and Butler's (1991) elaboration of loyalty and truthfulness as key dimensions of trustworthiness. More broadly, it mirrors the field's understanding that trustworthiness perceptions can originate in distinct sources (Schilke et al. 2021), of which loyalty and ethics are particularly relevant in the context of social exchange (Colquitt and Rodell 2011, Tyler 1989, Tyler 1994).⁶ While conventional wisdom suggests that the loyalty and ethics dimensions of trustworthiness go hand in hand (Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis 2007), others have suggested that they may diverge (Moore, Munguia Gomez, and Levine 2019) and have very different correlates (Levine and Schweitzer 2014, 2015). In other words, just because someone is loyal does not mean this person is ethical, and these two types of motivational tendencies can shape behavior in very different ways. For instance, in the film *Reservoir Dogs*, the character "Mr. Blonde" is extremely unethical, being a career criminal who robs jewelry stores and tortures a police officer, but he is also fanatically loyal to his fellow criminals, having spent four years in prison rather than inform on his co-conspirators. In contrast, the Soviet press and arts held up Pavlik Morozov, who denounced his own father for forgery in 1932 (with the result that his father died in the gulag), as the model of placing ethics over personal loyalty. When faced with a social dilemma, loyalty- and ethics-based trustworthiness can be associated with contradictory logics of action.

We adopt this trustworthiness typology and turn to an examination of the effect of ethics-based trustworthiness on the choice (rather than refusal) of obfuscation, which we suggest is diametrically opposed to that of loyalty-based trustworthiness. We expect that, when facing a

counterpart who is known to be highly ethical, actors will be less likely to propose a disreputable obfuscated exchange because their ethical counterpart may not agree to partake in it. Ethical standards will guide the partner to do the morally right thing and refuse to engage in transactions that are commonly viewed as inappropriate (Uslaner 2004), including those that are structurally obfuscated. Conversely, if a partner is perceived to be low in ethics-based trustworthiness, actors are more likely to engage in relational work, such as gift-giving, in hopes of preferential treatment (Chan and Yao 2018). As a result, we expect a moderated pattern, whereby the type and the level of trustworthiness produce a negative interaction effect on the choice of obfuscation. Increasing levels of a partner's perceived trustworthiness raise the odds of an actor pursuing obfuscation if that trustworthiness is loyalty-based but, conversely, reduce the likelihood of choosing obfuscation if that trustworthiness is ethics-based. A corollary of this argument is that when the counterpart's trustworthiness is held constant at a high level, the type of trustworthiness being ethics-based (vs. loyalty-based) decreases the likelihood of choosing obfuscation over refusal.

Hypothesis 5: An exchange partner high in ethics-based trustworthiness makes it less likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange.

Hypothesis 6: If an exchange partner's trustworthiness is ethics-based (rather than loyalty-based), high levels of trustworthiness make it less likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange. In other words, there will be a negative interaction between type of trustworthiness (ethics-based rather than loyalty-based) and level of trustworthiness (high vs. low) in predicting actor's choosing obfuscation.

Hypothesis 7: If an exchange partner's trustworthiness is high, the nature of that trustworthiness being ethics-based (rather than loyalty-based) makes it less likely that actors will choose obfuscation rather than refuse disreputable exchange.

METHODS

Study Overview

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a series of vignette experiments, in which participants assumed the role of the scenario's protagonist and made decisions on behalf of that protagonist (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010). The vignette methodology offers a number of unique advantages that make it particularly suitable for our investigation (Aguinis and Bradley 2014, Finch 1987, Schilke, Powell, and Schweitzer 2023, Wallander 2009). Not only does it afford high degrees of control over manipulated variables and the use of realistic decision contexts, but it also “allow[s] access to invisible domains of human experience” (Aviram 2012:463) by having participants engage with sensitive issues for which it would be relatively difficult to obtain relevant secondary data or conduct ethically acceptable field experiments (Levine et al. 2023, Weber 1992). The use of vignette experiments has thus become increasingly common in the sociological study of morality (e.g., Choi and David 2012, Doan, Loehr, and Miller 2014). A potential drawback of vignette studies stems from the fact that participants engage in hypothetical situations rather than actual experiences—an issue we sought to alleviate in two ways. First, we wrote the vignette to ensure high accessibility and similarity between the experimental scenario and natural settings (Taylor 2005), and we included questions regarding comprehensibility and realism toward the end of the survey that allow us to gauge the extent to which we succeeded. Second, we made our studies incentive compatible, such that choices in the experiment had real, monetary consequences for participants, which can ameliorate hypothetical bias (Carson and Groves 2007).⁷

Beyond these general objectives in terms of comprehensibility, realism, and incentive compatibility, our theory calls for an experimental situation in which participants make inferences about their exchange partner's trustworthiness before choosing between refusal, obfuscation, and quid pro quo. These criteria led us to develop a commercial bribery task that we loosely based on work by Bailey and Buchan (2019). In this experimental task, each participant assumes the role of a building developer hoping to build a new library but encountering permitting problems along the way. After learning about the specific building inspector handling their case (which allowed us to manipulate the inspector's trustworthiness, as described below), participants are given the opportunity to provide a "personal consideration" for the inspector to help move things along. Overall, our vignette addresses a setting in which different forms of disreputable exchange are particularly prevalent (e.g., Dineen 2021, Meisner 2017).

We use this task as the basis for all five of our experimental studies (see Online Supplement A for the individual vignettes). We start by examining our baseline hypothesis that higher levels of loyalty-based trustworthiness of the exchange partner increase the likelihood of choosing obfuscated exchange vs. refusal, with Study 1A focusing on obfuscation in the form of gift exchange and Study 1B in the form of brokered exchange. Study 2 is similar to Study 1A, but participants have a total of three (rather than two) alternatives from which to choose: gift, refusal, or quid pro quo. Study 3 introduces moral discomfort and expected reciprocity as mediators. Finally, Study 4 contrasts loyalty-based to ethics-based trustworthiness. Table 1 gives an overview of these studies.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Prior to commencing data collection, an Institutional Review Board provided approval for the research, and all five main studies were preregistered on the Open Science Framework

(OSF).⁸ Because our hypotheses are directional, we preregistered one-tailed tests (Cho and Abe 2013, Maner 2014).⁹ We performed *a priori* power analyses to determine our study sample sizes. Both the preregistration and the power analyses are described in Online Supplement B. We have made our study materials, along with the data and syntax, publicly available (<https://www.doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6B793>). We can confirm that we report all administered measures, conditions, and data exclusions, as well as the determination of our sample sizes (Nosek et al. 2013).

In addition to the five main studies reported in the paper, we also ran five exploratory studies that we mention in footnotes and describe in greater detail in Online Supplements C, D, E, F, and G. Because of their exploratory nature, we used two-tailed tests for analyzing these supplementary studies.

Study 1A

Participants. As in the studies that follow, we recruited Study 1A's participants via CloudResearch, formerly known as TurkPrime (Litman, Robinson, and Abberbock 2017). The CloudResearch platform facilitates the recruitment of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers who have shown prior evidence of attention and engagement and have not been associated with suspicious locations or duplicate IP addresses, thus addressing potential concerns regarding Amazon Mechanical Turk data quality (Aguinis, Villamor, and Ramani 2021, Eyal et al. 2022, Hauser et al. 2021). We also restricted our recruiting to US-based users who had at least 100 completed tasks and a 98% approval rating and who had not participated in any of our previous studies related to this project so that individuals could not participate in multiple studies. While collecting data online sacrifices a certain degree of control, it makes data collection significantly

more affordable, fast, and efficient (Bitektine, Lucas, and Schilke 2018) and allows for involving a population with higher demographic diversity than a student sample (Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014).

A total of 126 individuals (66 females, 60 males) participated in Study 1A. Of these participants, 108 identified as white (including multiracial people who are part white). The average age was 41.09 years ($SD = 12.47$), and the average work experience was 19.38 years ($SD = 12.61$). The median participant had an annual household income between \$50,000 and \$59,999, and 61.9% of participants had at least an undergraduate college degree.

Procedures. Participants were invited to an academic research study that required them to engage in a brief decision-making scenario and respond to several survey questions. After giving informed consent, participants read that they would take on the role of a building developer. We started the vignette by having participants decide on the amount of money they wanted to invest in preparing materials for their bid on a contract worth \$160,000. They were told that the more money they invested, the higher would be their chance of winning the contract, but the lower would be their profit if they won. They were then given a choice between investing either \$20,000 or \$40,000.¹⁰ The purpose of this first decision was to allow participants to settle into their role and to create a certain degree of commitment to the building contract (we do not use this response for testing any of our hypotheses, but post-hoc analyses showed that results are robust when including it as a control variable). Next, all participants were informed that they had won the bid. The next stage of the study concerned obtaining approval for the building plan from the municipal building inspector. At this point, participants learned that their bid violated zoning rules and an exception was unlikely to be approved before the contract expired, in which case they would have to fall back on a much less lucrative alternative job. They were then told that

their experienced mentor in the building industry suggested that a “personal consideration” for the building inspector could help move things along but that there would be a risk of getting caught and losing their contractor license.¹¹ They were also told that the mentor happened to know the particular building inspector and shared some background information about him; this is how we manipulated the building inspector’s trustworthiness, following an approach similar to that of Connelly, Miller, and Devers (2012) and Tetlock et al. (2013). This approach is also consistent with the notion of third-party trust, which describes how a trustor can learn about the trustworthiness of strangers from another individual who is connected to both the trustor and the trustee and who conveys his or her judgment of the trustee to the trustor (Coleman 1990).¹²

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in this single-factor between-subjects design. In the *high* loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, they read that the mentor characterizes the building inspector as “the kind of person you can trust. He always holds up his end of a relationship and makes sure to look out for the interests of those who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is very trustworthy.” In contrast, participants in the *low* loyalty-based trustworthiness condition read that the building inspector is “not the kind of person you can trust. He often fails to hold up his end of a relationship and doesn’t look out for the interests of others who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is not very trustworthy.” Finally, all participants were informed that the building inspector’s personal pick-up truck broke down recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.

Having read this information, participants were asked to indicate how they wanted to proceed, which serves as our measure for the dependent variable of exchange structure choice. Participants were presented two alternative options: either “[a]llow the contract to expire and forgo the earnings from winning the library contract (and fall back on the less lucrative

subcontractor job)” (refusal) or “[g]ive the inspector a pick-up truck worth \$20,000 as a personal gift and hope he thinks favorably towards you as he processes the permit application” (gift exchange).¹³ Participants then responded to survey items that we included for the purpose of testing the effectiveness of our manipulation, gauging participants’ perceptions of the study, and probing their attentiveness. Online Supplement H presents these items and their analyses for all five studies. In brief, results suggest (1) that our experimental manipulation was successful; (2) that participants viewed our vignette as easy to understand, highly realistic, similar to the real world, and only moderately complex; and (3) that virtually all participants paid sufficient attention to the study instructions. Consistent with our preregistered procedures and the recommendations by Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2014), our paper reports results without excluding inattentive participants. In exploratory post-hoc analyses, we dropped participants who provided incorrect responses to the attention screeners, and results were substantially similar. Our preregistration for Study 1A is available at <https://osf.io/2qvsf>, and instruments, data, and syntax for all studies can be downloaded at <https://www.doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6B793>.

Results. In accordance with our preregistered procedures, we used a logistic regression to test the effect of the building inspector’s loyalty-based trustworthiness on participants’ choice to offer a gift or refuse to do so. Regression results revealed a difference across conditions that was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ ($b = 1.24$, $SE = 0.37$, $z = 3.33$): almost two-thirds (65.6%) of the individuals in the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition chose gift exchange, compared to only slightly more than one-third (35.5%) of the individuals in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, indicating a moderately strong effect size (Cohen’s $d = 0.69$).¹⁴

We also used this study as an opportunity to explore relevant mechanisms and validate the salience of the two mediators proposed in H3 and H4. Immediately after participants chose

an exchange structure, we asked them to elaborate this choice. The two most common themes in these free text entries pointed in the direction of our two mediators. Here are some examples of expected reciprocity themes from Study 1A participants:

- I am willing to take a risk by "helping" the inspector out of a tough spot in the hopes that he helps me in return. If not, I lose the contract anyway. I see it as my best option at this point.
- I am hoping that it will help me get the permit
- I decided to take a chance on winning over the inspector because he is in a jam because of his truck breaking down. He is more likely to look favorably upon me if I help him out. This way I can make more money.

And Study 1A examples of moral discomfort themes:

- I decided the way I did because I thought the other way was unethical.
- I am not the kind of person that is willing to bribe anyone. I'd rather take the loss and move on before I breach my ethics like that.
- It is unethical to pay bribes, and moreover highly illegal.

Some Study 1A participants even mentioned both themes:

- It felt wrong to simply help the guy just because I wanted him to help me out with the permit. It wouldn't have been right to use so much money on him in hopes of him possibly helping me out later. I didn't want to chance it.
- Because I feel the alternative is unethical and illegal and that's not the way I roll. Also, it's a total gamble and I may end up being out an extra \$20K and still have to fall back on the less lucrative job.

We will return to a more systematic examination of these mechanisms in Study 3, where we report a mediation model.

Discussion. The results for Study 1A provided initial empirical support for H1. As predicted, we found an effect of a counterpart's loyalty-based trustworthiness on exchange

structure choice, with a greater likelihood of choosing gift exchange in the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition. Study 1B was designed to generalize this finding to another form of obfuscation: brokerage.

Study 1B

Participants. In this study, 205 individuals (130 female, 75 male) participated, of whom 163 (79.5%) identified as white. Participants had an average age of 42.23 years ($SD = 13.46$) and an average work experience of 20.35 years ($SD = 12.75$). The median household income was between \$50,000 and \$59,999, and 62.9% of participants had at least a college degree.

Procedures. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions in this one-factor between-subjects design: (1) low loyalty-based trustworthiness ($n = 101$) or (2) high loyalty-based trustworthiness ($n = 104$). The procedures were based on those of Study 1A, except here participants were told that the mentor asked if they “want him to handle greasing the wheels” and participants could choose between two options: “[g]ive your mentor \$20,000 and let him handle getting the inspector to sign the permit” (brokered exchange) or “[a]llow the contract to expire and forgo the earnings from winning the library contract (and fall back on the less lucrative subcontractor job)” (refusal). Our preregistration for Study 1B is available at <https://osf.io/4sj56>.

Results. Results of a logistic regression showed an effect of study condition on exchange structure choice that was statistically significant at $p = 0.007$ ($b = 0.73$, $SE = 0.30$, $z = 2.47$). Whereas 55.4% of participants assigned to the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition chose brokerage over refusal, this number was 16.7 percentage points higher for participants assigned

to the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, which corresponds to a small-to-moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.40$).

Discussion. Study 1B offers additional empirical support for H1. Not only does a counterpart's loyalty-based trustworthiness make it more likely that actors will choose gift exchange (as in Study 1A), but the same is also true for the likelihood of choosing brokered exchange. Study 2 extends our investigation to the presence of a third exchange structure: quid pro quo.

Study 2

Participants. This study included 323 participants (194 female, 129 male), 270 (83.6%) of whom identified as white. Participants had an average age of 42.26 years ($SD = 13.44$) and an average work experience of 20.30 years ($SD = 13.16$). The median annual household income was between \$50,000 and \$59,999, and 66.6% of the participants had at least a college degree.

Procedures. Participants were randomly assigned to either the low loyalty-based trustworthiness ($n = 161$) or the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($n = 162$) in this one-factor between-subjects design. The rest of the procedures mirrored those of Study 1A, with the key difference that participants were provided a choice among three (rather than two) alternatives. In addition to options for gift exchange and refusal (as in Study 1A), participants could choose to “[o]ffer the inspector a pick-up truck worth \$20,000 if (and only if) he will sign the permit then and there” (quid-pro-quo exchange). Our preregistration for Study 2 is available at <https://osf.io/2z8fd>.

Results. We ran a multinomial logistic regression to predict the exchange structure choice (gift, refusal, or quid pro quo) as a function of the loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, with gift exchange serving as the reference category. Table 2 summarizes the condition means. Similar to our results in Study 1A, we found an effect of the study condition on the contrast between gift exchange and refusal that was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ ($b = -1.35$, $SE = 0.30$, $z = -4.54$). Although refusal was more popular than gift with subjects in both the low and high loyalty-based trustworthiness conditions, refusal was much more popular than gift in the former condition, whereas the two choices were of comparable frequency in the latter condition. Thus, in relative terms, high loyalty-based trustworthiness makes the gift option more popular, and the corresponding effect size is strong (Cohen's $d = -0.75$). Moreover, there was an effect of the study condition on the contrast between gift and quid-pro-quo exchange ($b = -1.31$, $SE = 0.33$, $z = -4.00$, $p < 0.001$), with individuals in the high (vs. low) loyalty-based trustworthiness condition being more likely to choose gift exchange rather than quid-pro-quo exchange in both relative and absolute terms (Cohen's $d = -0.72$).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Discussion. Results from Study 2 offered empirical support for our second hypothesis. When given three exchange alternatives to choose from, an exchange partner having a high (vs. low) level of loyalty-based trustworthiness makes actors in relative terms more likely to choose obfuscated exchange than either refusal (H2a) or quid-pro-quo exchange (H2b). Please also see our exploratory analysis reported in Online Supplement F, where instead of allowing participants three answer choices, as in Study 2, we randomly assigned them to either a gift vs. refusal or a quid pro quo vs. refusal choice. In this analysis, we found that trustworthiness is a significantly stronger predictor of disreputable exchange when the exchange is obfuscated (rather than an

overt quid pro quo). Therefore, and to reduce complexity, our analyses that follow focus on the obfuscation vs. refusal contrast. We now turn to the causal mechanisms underlying the effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on exchange structure choice, which allows us to test the mediation effects proposed in H3 and H4.

Study 3

Participants. A total of 341 individuals (184 female, 157 male) participated in the study, 260 (76.2%) of whom identified as white. Participants had an average age of 40.47 years ($SD = 13.72$) and an average work experience of 18.42 years ($SD = 12.60$). The median annual household income among participants was between \$50,000-\$59,999, and 59.8% of them had at least a college degree.

Procedures. In this one-factor between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to either a low ($n = 168$) or a high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($n = 173$). The procedures followed those of Study 1A while adding survey questions for the two mediators between the presentation of the vignette text and the choice between gift exchange and refusal. Specifically, we measured the expected reciprocity mediator with the item “If I did something for the building inspector, he would likely return the favor” and the moral discomfort mediator with the item “I would feel highly uncomfortable asking the inspector for something unethical” (the mediators were anchored on a seven-point answer scale ranging from 1 “Completely disagree” to 7 “Completely agree” and were presented in randomized order).¹⁵ Our preregistration for Study 3 can be accessed at <https://osf.io/dsr9p>.

Results. In line with the results of the previous studies, a logistic regression pointed to a main effect of the study condition on exchange structure choice that is significant at $p < 0.001$ ($b = 1.01$, $SE = 0.24$, $z = 4.28$); participants assigned to the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition were more likely to choose gift exchange ($M = 46.2\%$) than were those assigned to the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($M = 23.8\%$), for a medium-to-large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.56$). These results replicate those of Study 1A and lend additional support to H1.

In accordance with our preregistration, we used the PROCESS package to conduct mediation bootstrapping analyses (Preacher and Hayes 2004; the mediation tests were run with 1,000 bootstrap samples using the PROCESS macro in SPSS; Hayes, 2022, Model 4). Calculating bootstrapped indirect effects has the advantage of providing a robust estimate without the need for restrictive assumptions about the sampling distribution (Hayes 2022). Mediation is established if the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (CI)¹⁶ for the parameter estimate of the indirect effect does not contain zero. Figure 1 shows that neither of the CIs for the indirect effects of study condition on exchange structure choice through the two mediators contains zero. Higher loyalty-based trustworthiness increases expected reciprocity, and expected reciprocity in turn is positively related to the likelihood of choosing gift exchange over refusal. Further, loyalty-based trustworthiness decreases moral discomfort, and moral discomfort in turn is negatively related to the likelihood of choosing gift exchange rather than refusal.¹⁷ Moreover, the effect of the independent variable is no longer statistically significant at conventional standards ($p = 0.20$) when the two mediators are included, indicating full mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986). We also ran these analyses for each of the two mediators separately, and results were very similar.

Figure 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion. This study demonstrated that two mediators—expected reciprocity and moral discomfort—help explain the effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on the choice of obfuscated exchange, in line with H3 and H4. The study thus adds insight to the mechanisms through which loyalty-based trustworthiness affects exchange structure choice. Our final study extends our investigation to a systematic comparison of two different types of exchange partner trustworthiness: loyalty-based vs. ethics-based.

Study 4

Participants. Study 4 involved a total of 281 participants (168 female, 113 male), 226 (80.4%) of whom identified as white. Participants had an average age of 40.79 years ($SD = 12.97$) and an average work experience of 19.25 years ($SD = 12.17$). The median household income in our sample was between \$50,000 and \$59,999, and 62.3% of participants had at least an undergraduate degree.

Procedures. Study procedures resembled those of Study 1A, with the key difference being that Study 4 used a 2 (type of trustworthiness: loyalty-based vs. ethics-based) \times 2 (level of trustworthiness: low versus high) between-subjects design. The loyalty-based trustworthiness conditions—both high and low—were identical to the two conditions of Study 1A, but the information the mentor provides about the building inspector was different in the two ethics-based trustworthiness conditions. In the *high* ethics-based trustworthiness condition, participants learned that the mentor characterizes the building inspector as “very strict and a total stickler for the rules. In short, ethical considerations are a top priority for the building inspector.” In contrast, participants in the *low* ethics-based trustworthiness condition read that the building inspector “plays fast and loose and is not exactly a stickler for the rules. In short, ethical considerations are

not a top priority for the building inspector.” Our preregistration for Study 4 can be found at <https://osf.io/5rnm8>.

Results. Focusing on participants assigned to one of the two loyalty-based trustworthiness conditions, we replicated our previous results for H1. A logistic regression demonstrated that more participants chose gift exchange (vs. refusal) in the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition (48.5%) compared to the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition (26.8%), $b = 0.95$, $SE = 0.36$, $z = 2.62$, $p = .004$, Cohen’s $d = 0.52$. As predicted by H5, this effect flipped when focusing on ethics-based trustworthiness. Another logistic regression showed that more participants chose gift exchange (vs. refusal) in the low ethics-based trustworthiness condition (47.1%) compared to the high ethics-based trustworthiness condition (31.9%), $b = -0.64$, $SE = 0.35$, $z = -1.84$, $p = 0.03$, Cohen’s $d = -0.35$. Figure 2 visualizes the condition means.

Figure 2 ABOUT HERE

To examine the statistical significance of the difference between these two effects and thereby test H6, we estimated a logistic regression on the full sample, with exchange structure choice serving as dependent variable and type of trustworthiness (loyalty-based vs. ethics-based), level of trustworthiness (low versus high), and their interaction serving as predictor variables. Table 3 displays the results of this regression. In support of H6, the interaction term has a negative coefficient ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3 ABOUT HERE

Finally, we tested H7 by focusing on participants assigned to one of the high trustworthiness conditions and regressing exchange structure choice on the type of trustworthiness. Consistent with our hypothesis, gift exchange was less frequent among those

assigned to the high ethics-based (rather than high loyalty-based) trustworthiness condition (see the two right bars in Figure 2), $b = -0.70$, $SE = 0.35$, $z = -1.99$, $p = 0.02$, Cohen's $d = -0.38$.¹⁸

Discussion. Study 4 contrasts two different types of trustworthiness and their role in the choice of exchange structure. Whereas higher loyalty-based trustworthiness makes gift exchange *more* likely, higher ethics-based trustworthiness makes gift exchange *less* likely. This strong moderation effect suggests that high (vs. low) loyalty will lead the alter to reciprocate, and one should therefore offer a gift in hope of eliciting reciprocity. In contrast, high ethics will lead the alter to eschew ethical impropriety (e.g., reciprocating a gift through undermining one's professional duties) but those low in ethics will be much easier to bribe via gifts. These results demonstrate that the effect of a counterpart's trustworthiness on choosing obfuscated exchange is highly contingent on the nature of that trustworthiness.

CONCLUSIONS

Economic sociology, and especially the relational work literature, has long emphasized the difficulty and interactional complexity of commensurating certain goods (Bandelj 2020, Zelizer 1983, Zelizer 2005). Recent theoretical developments and related empirical work have highlighted the obfuscatory means by which people achieve otherwise disreputable exchange circuits (Guo and Xu 2022, Hoang 2018, Mears 2015, Mears 2020, Rossman 2014, Schilke and Rossman 2018). In this article, we build on this new generation of the relational work literature but shift to a first-person perspective. Our paper substantially extends the economic sociology of obfuscation by providing empirical insight into how actors choose to engage in obfuscated disreputable exchange rather than forgo the potential transaction or make an overt quid pro quo. We do so by examining the critical yet contingent role that trustworthiness perceptions play in

that choice while adding knowledge of causal mechanisms that are at the heart of theory development.

Actors who wish to buy or sell a nonmarket good are presented with a dilemma about how to proceed. If they follow their culture, they will see this commensuration as disreputable and forgo the exchange. If they follow the structural incentives of gains from trade, they will engage in the trade as an overt exchange. Or they may task agency to act as their inner lawyer to find a way to legitimize the exchange (Haidt 2001), perhaps not only verbally (Pinker, Nowak, and Lee 2008, Zelizer 2005) but also structurally through obfuscation. When it works, obfuscation allows the actor to both achieve the gains from trade *and* avoid moral disreputability. Schilke and Rossman (2018) demonstrated that effectively obfuscated exchange mitigates moral condemnation *ex post* (after the exchange has been completed). Here, we shift the focus to the actor's *ex ante* considerations (preceding the occurrence of the exchange) and draw attention to the actor's expectations of both moral reproach and gains from trade (which will only be achieved if reciprocity is forthcoming). Moreover, we show that these expectations are themselves a function of the relational context and, more specifically, of trust.

While our article primarily contributes to economic sociology and the literature on trust, it also speaks to other research streams. For example, even though social exchange theory has done extensive experimental work on gift exchange (which that literature refers to as “reciprocated,” as compared to “negotiated,” exchange), social exchange theory seldomly studies disreputable exchange (but see Lawler and Hipp (2010) for a rare exception), nor do these experiments typically allow participants to choose among exchange structures (Krishnan et al. 2021). Our investigation may inspire social exchange scholars to devote greater attention to disreputable types of exchange while also breaking with common practice and treating the type

of exchange as the explanandum (rather than the explanans). In particular, whereas prior social exchange research has pointed to exchange structure shaping trust (Kollock 1994, Molm et al. 2000, Molm et al. 2009), our investigation suggests the merit of also considering that trust shapes types of exchange.

Ours is among the first investigations to systematically analyze the conditions facilitating obfuscation, with a focus on the role of trust, but there are plausibly a variety of other conditions that could play comparable roles. Perhaps most notably, power may serve similar purposes of reducing social uncertainty in that it enables a powerful actor to punish a non-complying counterpart (Emerson 1962, Evans and Schilke forthcoming, Molm 1989), and the anticipation of this capacity to punish could make it more attractive to obfuscate rather than engage in a quid pro quo or refuse the exchange. Similarly, homophily can facilitate cooperation by reducing social uncertainty (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, Melamed et al. 2020), and this finding may extend to cooperation via obfuscated disreputable exchange. Likewise, socioeconomic status may be the basis of homophily, as with doctors who accept tactful relationally-embedded gifts and favors from the elite but deflect the clumsy more overtly transactional attempts of the lower class (Guo and Xu 2022). We also see great value in further analysis of actors' sensemaking and framing of obfuscated exchange, including how the use of narratives (Rosenkranz 2016) and cognitive distancing (Child 2021) may help alleviate moral discomfort. Not only actor- and dyad-level but also broader conditions in the environment surrounding the exchange may matter. For instance, institutional logics provide actors with cultural resources to make sense of and legitimize their behavior (Friedland and Alford 1991, Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012, Yoo, Schilke, and Bachmann 2021). Fields dominated by a "family" logic that emphasizes unconditional loyalty as the socially appropriate basis of

action may favor obfuscation, whereas quid pro quo exchange may be more common in fields characterized by a “market” logic that focuses on self-interest. Moreover, gaps in the state’s regulatory infrastructure may create opportunities for certain obfuscation structures to proliferate (Palmgren 2022). In sum, we see many opportunities for future research to shed light on the specific circumstances that shape actors’ choices of exchange structure.

While our investigation adds to the body of research using vignette experiments to single out causal predictors of disreputable exchange (e.g., Amengual and Bartley 2022, Schilke and Rossman 2018), this methodology is certainly not without limitations. Although systematic comparisons suggest that estimated causal effects in vignette experiments tend to be remarkably well-aligned with those obtained in comparable behavioral studies (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015, Raub and Weesie 1990), further research is needed to establish the extent to which this is true for the specific effects studied in our paper. Note that the lower stakes of a vignette (as compared to a behavioral or field) design are common to all experimental conditions and thus should mostly affect the intercept and not the treatment effects that are the subject of our hypotheses. Perhaps the most important way of establishing the role of trustworthiness in disreputable exchange with real stakes would be qualitative research that studies the link between trustworthiness and obfuscation in naturalistic settings to capture the nuances of the experiences, voices, and behavior of the individuals involved.

Our vignettes focus on bribery, but we can speculate about how the findings would generalize to the effects of trustworthiness on other types of obfuscated disreputable exchange. As discussed in the introduction section, the international ransom market relies heavily on trust to facilitate obfuscated exchange (Shortland 2019). Similarly, transactional sex is constituted by gift exchange and so implies a trust problem regarding whether reciprocity, in the form of sexual

favors, will ever be achieved. From the sugar daddy's perspective, transactional sex carries the risk that reciprocity will be nonexistent or inadequate, as seen in the early 20th century complaint about "salamanders" who would accept gifts but fail to provide vaginal intercourse (Clement 2006:65-66). One solution to this would be repeat transactions, with the pecuniary gift for sex counter-gift cycle occurring repeatedly between the same sugar daddy and sugar baby. Similarly, we might see mechanisms such as gradual escalation of gifts to build trust incrementally over the course of a relationship (Blau 1964). Some fields of obfuscated exchange require not only trust that reciprocity will be achieved but also trust that reciprocity was achieved, even ex post. In other words, sometimes reciprocity is a credence good (Darby and Karni 1973). The market for payola (commercial bribery in radio), for example, relies on a market information regime to verify reciprocity; a gift is only reckoned as reciprocated with airplay if the airplay is tallied in a reliable independent database (Rossman 2012:138). However, the database only gives information on whether reciprocity was achieved; incentivizing reciprocity still requires other means, such as a trusting relationship.

This investigation has identified two mediators that translate loyalty-based trustworthiness into attempts at obfuscated disreputable exchange. The more obvious mechanism is reciprocity. If I want to elicit cooperation from someone but have no way of enforcing reciprocity, I must have reason to expect that they will reciprocate, and I am more likely to hold this expectation if they have a reputation for loyalty-based trustworthiness. It is thus fitting that social exchange theory (Molm, Schaefer, and Collett 2007, Molm 2010) and gift exchange theory (Bourdieu 1990) both emphasize the importance of reciprocity when it can only be tacitly expected but not enforced.

The more intriguing mediator is moral discomfort. It is obvious that being morally uncomfortable with something could make one less likely to do it (Vaisey 2009), but the less intuitive part is the first stage of this mediation pathway, wherein trustworthiness reduces moral discomfort. To a moral philosopher, especially one in the Kantian tradition (Wilson and Denis 2021), whether I trust a potential co-conspirator is immaterial to the deontological rightness or wrongness of my action. If I invite you to drive the getaway car while I rob a liquor store, it does not make my action any less immoral if I expect you to wait idling at the curb than if I think you will drive away prematurely. And yet we see evidence here that trust *does* matter to our study participants. Those who are given reason to believe in their partner's loyalty feel not only that it is more *practical* to offer an obfuscated bribe (captured by the reciprocity mediator) but also that it is less *immoral* (measured by moral discomfort). This suggests that our participants are not engaging in moral reasoning in terms of the categorical imperative, nor for that matter in terms of measuring possible actions against a received code like a civics education or a religious catechism. Rather, they are engaging in moral intuition, which regularly dominates moral reasoning (Haidt 2001). One corollary of moral intuition is that part of what shapes our own moral sense is anticipation of how we will be judged by others. This decidedly situational understanding of morality fits with findings from psychology, such as that drawings of eyes remind people of being watched and prime moral behavior (Haley and Fessler 2005). Regardless of whether or not we assume objective morality exists, this paper shows that moral intuitions are in large part a relational process, in which one of the factors that determines whether a possible action is morally uncomfortable is how we expect to be judged for that action. Importantly, the issue is not just our expectation of being judged by Mead's (1934) *generalized other* (based on what society as a whole views as acceptable) but also our expectation of being judged by a

particular other (based on taking the perspective of a specific alter and calibrating our standards accordingly). Thus, moral discomfort is not exclusively a matter of socialization but also a situationally specific matter: I learn how to be good, but I also adjust my sense of what it means to be good if I trust that you will not judge me for a bit of wickedness. By highlighting the relational construction of moral perceptions, our investigation contributes to the sociology of morality (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010) by showing how social context shapes moral self-evaluation and, by extension, behavior (e.g., Simpson, Harrell, and Willer 2013, Stets and Carter 2012).

It is worth noting that our mediation model considers the morality and reciprocity pathways simultaneously, making ours one of the rare empirical efforts to capture not only the constraining but also the enabling role of social structure and to show that both are at play in parallel (Giddens 1984). A potential social exchange partner carries the risk that they may condemn us for proposing something immoral but also the promise that they may reward us with a hoped-for counter-gift. Our investigation thus heeds DiMaggio and Powell's (1991:22) call for advancing a "theory of practical action" that does justice to accounting for both the restrictions of the iron cage and the opportunity for strategic action that can result from social context. This paper also lends further credibility to the notion that reflexivity is a key ingredient to agency (Schilke and Lumineau forthcoming, Seo and Creed 2002, Thornton et al. 2012), in light of our finding that perceptions of morality and expectations of reciprocity substantially mediate the effect of the relational context on choice.

Finally, this paper builds on the sociological literature on trust but also extends this literature by studying two distinct forms of trustworthiness simultaneously and contrasting them to one another. The sociological literature generally conceptualizes trustworthiness as loyalty-based—that is, as confident expectations regarding another's benevolent behavior (e.g., Barbalet

2009, Cook et al. 2005, Granovetter 2017). This is a striking contrast to the usage in development economics and political science emphasizing ethics-based trustworthiness (e.g., Algan and Cahuc 2013, Uslaner 2002). Many studies have simply presumed one type of trustworthiness stands for all, an assumption seemingly justified by a meta-analytic investigation that attempted to directly compare the two types of trustworthiness and found effects in the same direction and of comparable magnitude (Colquitt et al. 2007). Similarly, demonstrations of fidelity to community values make one more trusted not only as an ethical community member but also as a loyal transaction partner (Fehrler and Przepiorka 2013, Hall et al. 2015, Iannaccone 1994). These findings plausibly justify many studies' practice of treating trustworthiness as a unidimensional phenomenon. Indeed, it is intuitive that if I trust someone to behave well towards the entire community, then I would expect her to also behave honorably towards me personally. However, this study shows a strikingly different pattern. Whereas perceptions of loyalty-based trustworthiness facilitate obfuscated exchange, perceptions of ethics-based trustworthiness impede it. Therefore, our study highlights possible tensions across different types of trustworthiness, suggesting that important research questions may be forgone and inconsistent results achieved if different dimensions of trustworthiness are ignored or treated as indicators of a unitary concept. Moreover, it goes further by suggesting an important contingency: such unity breaks down when the transaction is morally disreputable and thus the ethical person will balk at cooperating. A criminal conspiracy requires a special type of trust, where you trust your partner to betray society but be loyal to you.

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NOTES

¹ Although the notion of nonmarket goods is sometimes used to refer to goods produced within the household, typically in the context of such inquiries as the gendered nature of housework, we do not include this usage but only those things that would be scandalous to acquire on the market. Housework and many forms of care work do not meet this definition, as whatever stigma might apply to hiring a nanny or maid is different in kind from that of hiring a prostitute or bribing a politician.

² Although the participants in our empirical studies are all Americans, it is worth flagging that there is considerable cultural variation in understandings of legitimate exchange practices and in particular what constitutes a “bribe.” Åkerström (2014) describes a “bribery gaze” in which Swedes understand as extremely unethical situations that Americans would consider to be trivial conflicts of interest. Conversely, many cultures in East Asia have understandings of legitimate business hospitality and gifting that are much more expansive than American ones, while still understanding some actions as illegitimate bribery (Hoang 2022, Smart 1993).

³ Other potential downsides of trust that we bracket from our discussion in this paper include excessive closure and the exclusion of strangers (and thus social inequality and productivity losses) (Cook 2005, Portes 1998) as well as the misplacing and exploitation of trust that have immediate negative consequences for the trustor (Kuwabara et al. 2014, Schilke and Huang 2018, Yamagishi 2011).

⁴ Both Rossman (2014) and Schilke and Rossman (2018) emphasize the contrast between *quid pro quo* and obfuscation, though Schilke and Rossman (2018) also collected data on responses to

a refusal condition. Even though our main focus is a contrast between obfuscation and refusal, we sympathize with the inclusion of quid pro quo, and so Hypothesis 2 is written to imply a three-category design (refusal, obfuscation, and quid pro quo). Unfortunately, the switch from exchange structure as an independent variable, as in Schilke and Rossman (2018), to exchange structure as a dependent variable in this paper introduces substantial complexity. A three-category response variable is radically more complicated to analyze and interpret, especially in mediation (Study 3) and moderation designs (Study 4). Thus, for most of our studies we limited ourselves to a binary response variable. In pilot testing, we experimented with making the response variable a contrast between quid pro quo and obfuscation, but we found in the free response field that about 10% of participants vehemently objected to a forced choice between two options they perceived as unethical. However, participants seemed to find a contrast between obfuscation and refusal to be a meaningful one that adequately captured a range of responses they felt comfortable giving. Moreover, another exploratory analysis presented in Online Supplement F contrasts the role of loyalty-based trustworthiness based on whether participants are randomly assigned to a condition in which they can choose between obfuscation and refusal or between quid pro quo and refusal. Results revealed that loyalty-based trustworthiness matters much more when predicting obfuscation vs. refusal rather than quid pro quo vs. refusal, justifying our conceptual focus on the obfuscation-refusal outcome.

⁵ The distinction between loyalty- and ethics-based trustworthiness has certain similarities to that between relational and generalized trust, but whereas loyalty- and ethics-based trustworthiness refer to distinct aspects of the trustee's motivations, relational and generalized trust refer to differences in the size of the circle of trustees (Schilke et al. 2021).

⁶ We note that some investigations point to a third trustworthiness dimension: ability, or the partner's perceived capacity to accomplish a specific task at hand effectively (Mayer et al. 1995, Reimann et al. 2022). In our research, we bracket this dimension because we have no theoretical reason to expect that a partner's ability-based trustworthiness will shape actors' choice of obfuscated exchange.

⁷ Specifically, participants were informed that their decisions in the study would determine their potential bonus payment, with every \$100,000 earned in the task yielding a \$1 bonus. In fact, we paid all participants a US\$1.20 bonus on top of their US\$1.00 participation fee. At an expected ten minutes spent on the task, this equates to US\$13.20/hour, which was slightly above the effective nationwide minimum wage in the US at the time of data collection.

⁸ The preregistered versions of the hypotheses are identical to those presented in the paper with the single exception that the preregistered versions refer to "appropriate exchange" rather than "refusal." The new language has two advantages: 1) the term *exchange* might be confusing when referring to a possible transaction foregone and 2) as suggested by a peer reviewer, *appropriate* is gratuitously theory-laden as it presumes the participant's normative framework.

⁹ Nonetheless, most hypotheses are supported even when applying two-tailed tests.

¹⁰ The option to invest different amounts on the bid mean that at stage two participants have different sunk costs. To explore robustness to this design, in Online Supplement C we repeat Study 1A, but with no first stage and thus no discrepancy in sunk costs.

¹¹ Across both experimental conditions the mentor endorses offering a "personal consideration" and only differs in whether the potential bribery target is trustworthy. To explore how this affects responses, in Online Supplement D we show that results are robust to bribery strategy being suggested by a source with whom the participant's character has no prior relationship.

¹² To probe robustness of our results to an alternative approach to manipulating trustworthiness, we conducted a validation study in which we manipulated trustworthiness of the building inspector based on his general reputation in the field (Keren 2007). As reported in greater detail in Online Supplement E, we replicated the proposed effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on exchange structure choice when using this alternate manipulation.

¹³ The mention of a subcontractor job makes it incentive-compatible for participants to forgo the exchange if they expect a high probability that the “personal consideration” option will be unsuccessful. That is, a participant may think the payoffs for an unsuccessful bribe will be less than the payoffs to the subcontractor job, which in turn will be lower than the payoffs to the successful bribe. However, this still underplays the downsides to a failed bribe, since the downside risk in the experiment is the opportunity cost of 50 cents in bonus payments and not losing one’s license (and the revenue streams it implies), fines, personal embarrassment, and so on that would apply in a field setting. This small downside may be part of the explanation as to why “personal consideration” options were so popular with our participants (all of whom were Americans), despite the United States being a relatively low corruption country.

¹⁴ We converted the log-odds ratio generated by the logistic regression to Cohen’s *d* using the method suggested by Sánchez-Meca, Marín-Martínez, and Chacón-Moscoso (2003:451).

¹⁵ To explore alternative measures of moral discomfort, we conducted a supplementary study, which produced results consistent with those from Study 3 in the paper. For more details, please see Online Supplement G.

¹⁶ Consistent with our other hypothesis tests in this paper, we preregistered one-tailed tests for analyzing mediation effects. Because the PROCESS macro currently does not accommodate one-

tailed testing, we obtained the 90% two-tailed CI, whose lower boundary is equivalent to that of a 95% one-tailed CI (e.g., Perugini, Gallucci, and Costantini 2014:330).

¹⁷ A negative effect of the independent variable on the mediator and a negative effect of the mediator on the dependent variable together imply a positive mediated effect on the principle that multiplying two negative numbers yields a positive product.

¹⁸ An exploratory post-hoc analysis examined whether the type of trustworthiness also matters when holding the level of trustworthiness constant at a low level, essentially comparing the two left bars in Figure 2. This analysis revealed an effect that is significant at $p = 0.01$ ($b = 0.89$, $SE = 0.36$, $z = 2.48$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$), with gift exchange being more frequent among those assigned to the low ethics-based (rather than low loyalty-based) trustworthiness condition.

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TABLES

Table 1. Study Overview

Study	Preregistration	Hypothesis addressed	Type of effect	Experimental manipulation(s)	Dependent variable	Sample size	Key finding
1A	Yes	H1	Main effect	Loyalty-based trustworthiness (low vs. high)	Refusal vs. gift exchange	126 participants	A counterpart high in loyalty-based trustworthiness makes it more likely that actors choose gift exchange (vs. refusal)
1B	Yes	H1	Main effect	Loyalty-based trustworthiness (low vs. high)	Refusal vs. brokered exchange	205 participants	Results of Study 1A generalize to brokerage
2	Yes	H2	Main effect	Loyalty-based trustworthiness (low vs. high)	Refusal vs. gift exchange vs. quid pro quo	323 participants	A counterpart high in loyalty-based trustworthiness makes it more likely that actors choose gift (vs. quid pro quo) exchange
3	Yes	H1, H3, H4	Mediation effect	Loyalty-based trustworthiness (low vs. high)	Refusal vs. gift exchange	341 participants	Expected reciprocity and moral discomfort mediate the effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on choosing gift exchange
4	Yes	H1, H5, H6, H7	Moderation effect	Level of trustworthiness (low vs. high) × Type of trustworthiness (loyalty- vs. ethics-based)	Refusal vs. gift exchange	281 participants	The effects of loyalty-based vs. ethics-based trustworthiness on exchange structure choice go in diametrically opposite directions

Table 2. Condition Means – Study 2

Variable	Study condition		Difference between conditions
	Low loyalty-based trustworthiness	High loyalty-based trustworthiness	
Gift exchange	13.7%	37.7%	24.0%
Refusal	54.7%	38.9%	-15.8%
Quid pro quo	31.7%	23.5%	-8.2%

Table 3. Logistic Regression, Interaction Model – Study 4

	Gift exchange (vs. refusal)
Ethics-based trustworthiness (vs. loyalty-based trustworthiness)	0.89** (0.36)
High trustworthiness (vs. low trustworthiness)	0.95** (0.36)
Ethics-based × High trustworthiness	-1.59*** (0.50)
Constant	-1.01*** (0.27)

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 281$. † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (one-tailed).

FIGURES

Figure 1. Mediation Model – Study 3

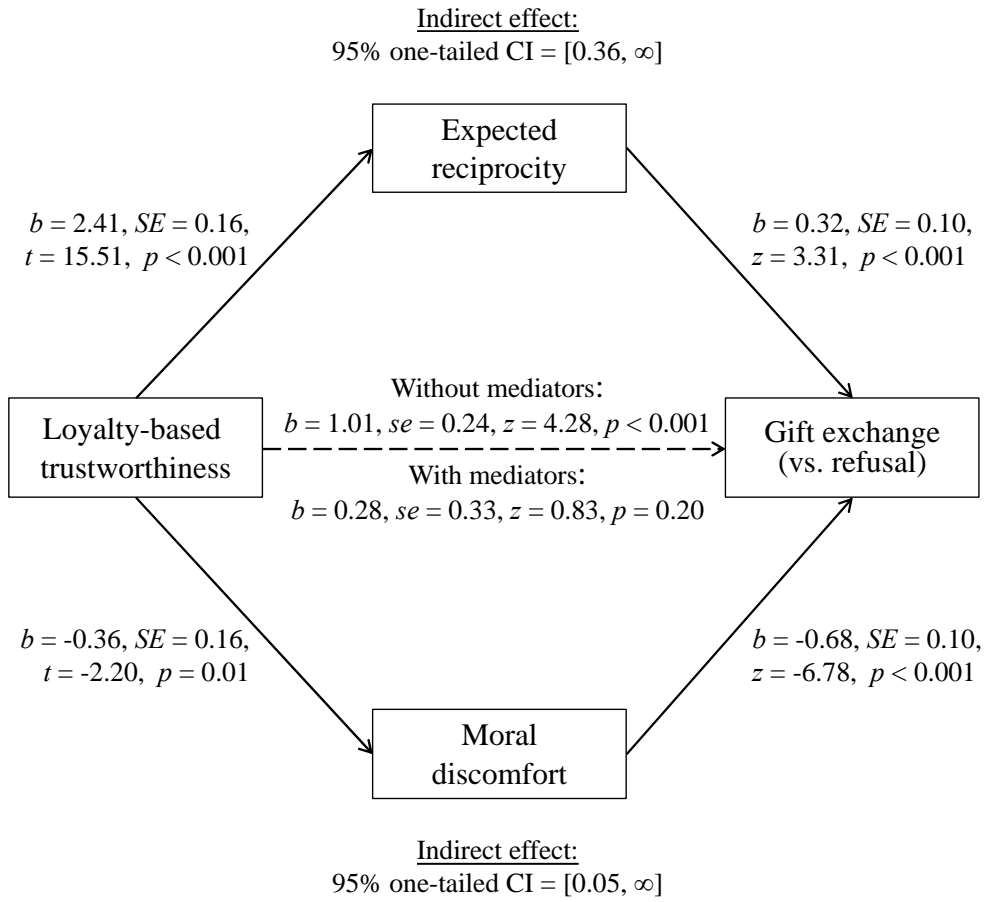
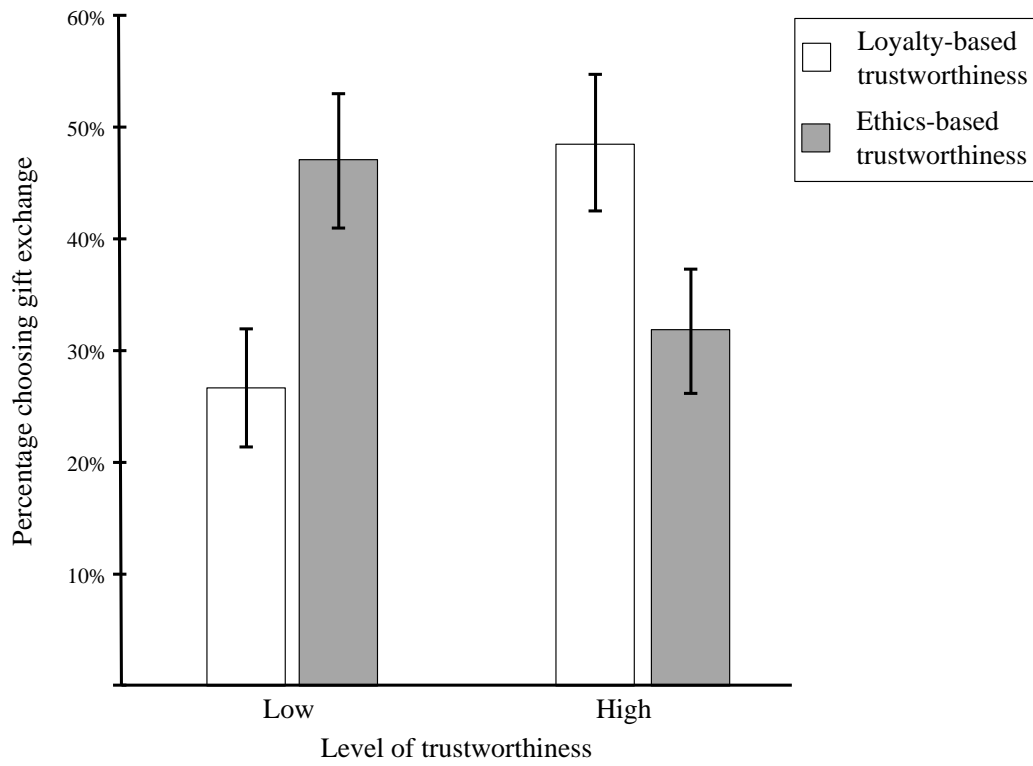


Figure 2. Exchange Structure Choice by Condition – Study 4



Note: Error bars represent standard errors.

ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

Part A: Vignettes

Studies 1A, 2, and 3 (Gift Exchange)

Low loyalty-based trustworthiness	High loyalty-based trustworthiness
<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector, but of course there's always a risk of getting caught and losing your contractor license. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before and says that he is not the kind of person you can trust. He often fails to hold up his end of a relationship and doesn't look out for the interests of others who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is not very trustworthy.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>	<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector, but of course there's always a risk of getting caught and losing your contractor license. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before and says that he is the kind of person you can trust. He always holds up his end of a relationship and makes sure to look out for the interests of those who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is very trustworthy.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>

Study 4 (Gift Exchange)

In addition to the low loyalty-based trustworthiness and the high loyalty-based trustworthiness conditions (shown above), Study 4 also includes low ethics-based trustworthiness and high ethics-based trustworthiness conditions (shown below), for a total of four conditions.

Low ethics-based trustworthiness	High ethics-based trustworthiness
<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector, but of course there's always a risk of getting caught and losing your contractor license. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before. Your friend says the inspector plays fast and loose and is not exactly a stickler for the rules. In short, ethical considerations are not a top priority for the building inspector.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>	<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector, but of course there's always a risk of getting caught and losing your contractor license. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before. Your friend says the inspector is very strict and a total stickler for the rules. In short, ethical considerations are a top priority for the building inspector.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>

Study 1B (Brokerage)

Low loyalty-based trustworthiness	High loyalty-based trustworthiness
<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector and asks if you want him to handle greasing the wheels. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before and says that he is not the kind of person you can trust. He often fails to hold up his end of a relationship and doesn't look out for the interests of others who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is not very trustworthy.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>	<p>Upon winning the contract, your company still needs to get approval from the municipal building inspector. If you are unable to secure the permit within 30 days, you cannot begin construction and the contract is void, so you do not collect the \$160,000 on the library project. However, you are pretty sure that if the library project falls through, you could pick up work as a subcontractor on another project for \$50,000.</p> <p>The building inspector observes that your library plan calls for a two-story building, but the neighborhood is normally zoned for one story only. Obtaining an exception is not impossible but rare and usually very time-consuming. Your contract requires you to build a two-story building. In any case, you don't have enough time for a lengthy deliberation about an exemption.</p> <p>You go to your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask for advice on handling permit troubles. Your friend mentions that you could help things along with a "personal consideration" for the building inspector and asks if you want him to handle greasing the wheels. He then asks, by the way, which inspector is it? You tell him the inspector's name.</p> <p>It turns out your friend has worked with the inspector before and says that he is the kind of person you can trust. He always holds up his end of a relationship and makes sure to look out for the interests of those who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is very trustworthy.</p> <p>From other sources, you hear that the building inspector's personal pick-up truck broke down very recently and that this has been a major pain for the inspector.</p>

Part B: Preregistered power analyses

We targeted each main study reported in the manuscript to have 90% power. If multiple hypotheses were tested in the same study (i.e., Studies 2, 3, and 4), we determined the sample size based on the power analysis for the weakest of the effects. Since our hypotheses are both directional and preregistered, one-tailed tests are appropriate (Cho and Abe 2013, Maner 2014).

We based our power analyses on pilot test data. We sampled with replacement from the pilot test data to create resamples of arbitrary size and then tested if the appropriate one-tailed hypothesis gave a z-value > 1.645 (or in the case of left-tailed tests, < -1.645) 90% of the time out of 1,000 trials. This approach allowed us to use a single power analysis framework for a variety of estimation types (logistic regression, multinomial logistic regression, and mediation analysis) used in our paper.

The preregistrations are available online, and the notebooks containing the power analyses can be found under the “files” tab for each preregistration:

- Study 1A (<https://osf.io/2qvsv>)
- Study 1B (<https://osf.io/4sj56>)
- Study 2 (<https://osf.io/2z8fd>)
- Study 3 (<https://osf.io/dsr9p>)
- Study 4 (<https://osf.io/5rnm8>)

Part C: No Bidding Stage

In the main analyses, we first had subjects declare whether they preferred to invest \$20,000 or \$40,000 in preparing their bid. Across all our studies, about 80% chose to invest \$40,000. To demonstrate robustness to the absence of sunk costs, in this supplementary study we reran Study 1A but without the initial stage and collected a sample of $n = 250$.

The results were robust to this change. A logistic regression of exchange structure choice on experimental condition pointed to an effect that was statistically significant at $p = 0.004$ and in the expected direction ($b = 0.90$, $SE = 0.31$, $z = 2.91$), with more participants choosing obfuscation over refusal in the high than in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition.

Part D: Alternative source for suggesting “personal consideration”

In our main analyses, the mentor suggests that the participant consider offering the inspector a “personal consideration.” In this supplementary study, we have the suggestion come from an alternate source who has a weaker tie to the subject’s character.

The study is identical to Study 1A except that after learning the inspector will likely decline the permit, the vignette reads “Later that day, you’re waiting in line at Home Depot and complaining about your situation to another contractor who you met waiting in line. He suggests you could help things along with a ‘personal consideration’ for the building inspector, but of course there’s always a risk of getting caught and losing your contractor license.”

The vignette then transitions back to the mentor with “On your way home, you stop by to visit your highly experienced mentor in the building industry and ask him what he knows about the particular building inspector handling your case.” The experimental manipulation then follows with identical wording as in Study 1A.

As an exploratory study, we collected a sample size of $n = 100$.

The results were robust to this alternative setup, and indeed the point estimate of the trustworthiness effect is almost identical to that in Study 1A. A logistic regression of exchange structure choice on experimental condition was statistically significant at $p = 0.006$ and in the expected direction ($b = 1.24$, $SE = 0.45$, $z = 2.75$), with more participants choosing obfuscation over refusal in the high than in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition.

Part E: Alternative trustworthiness manipulation

To demonstrate robustness of our results to an alternate approach of manipulating trustworthiness, we reran Study 1A while using a different reputation-based manipulation that we adopted from Keren (2007). In the *high* loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, participants read: “The building inspector handling your case is well-known in the local building industry to be the kind of person you can trust. He always holds up his end of a relationship and makes sure to look out for the interests of those who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is very trustworthy.” In contrast in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition, participants learned: “The building inspector handling your case is well-known in the local building industry to not be the kind of person you can trust. He often fails to hold up his end of a relationship and doesn’t look out for the interests of others who have relied on him. In short, it appears the building inspector is not very trustworthy.”

Except for the manipulation, we replicated the experimental procedures and participant recruiting criteria exactly. We also aimed for the same sample size, but CloudResearch recruited one additional participant to our replication study, for a usable sample of $n = 127$.

Supporting the effectiveness of the manipulation, we found significantly greater agreement to our manipulation check item (“Generally speaking, this building inspector is trustworthy”) in the high vs. the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($t = 8.02, p < 0.001$). A logistic regression of exchange structure choice on experimental condition pointed to an effect that was statistically significant at $p = 0.02$ and in the expected direction ($b = 0.86, SE = 0.38, z = 2.26$), with more participants choosing obfuscation over refusal in the high than in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition.

Part F: Random assignment to type of available disreputable exchange

Much of the obfuscated disreputable exchange literature (e.g., Schilke and Rossman 2018) involves a contrast between refusal, quid pro quo, and obfuscation. In Study 2, we allow participants all three options, but Studies 1A, 1B, 3, and 4 only cover refusal vs. obfuscation. In this exploratory analysis, we used a 2 (low vs. high loyalty-based trustworthiness) \times 2 (choice between obfuscation and refusal or between quid pro quo and refusal) between-subjects design. That is, each participant had two choices, one of which was refusal, but the other available choice was randomly assigned.¹

Except for the randomly assigned alternate exchange structure choice, we replicated the experimental procedures and participant recruiting criteria of Study 1A and collected a sample of $n = 100$.

We analyzed this data through a logit analysis with loyalty-based trustworthiness, form of disreputable exchange, and an interaction term of the two as independent variables and refusal (0) vs. disreputable exchange (1) as dependent variable. We found that trust matters much more for the obfuscation vs. refusal dependent variable (the same outcome used in Studies 1A, 1B, 3, and 4) than it does for the quid pro quo vs. refusal item. The interaction between high (vs. low) loyalty-based trustworthiness and obfuscation/refusal (vs. quid pro quo/refusal) form of exchange choice has a strong positive effect ($b = 2.42$, $SE = 0.87$, $z = 2.78$, $p = 0.005$), with trustworthiness being especially likely to elicit disreputable exchange if the available version was obfuscated.

In addition, we also did a subsample analysis splitting the sample by form of the dependent variable and testing the effects of loyalty-based trustworthiness on choosing the available disreputable exchange option. When the choice is between obfuscation vs. refusal ($n = 49$), there is a strong positive effect of trust on choosing obfuscation ($b = 1.72$, $SE = 0.65$, $z = 2.65$, $p = 0.008$). This is similar to the test of Hypothesis 1 in Study 1A, which this subsample analysis replicates. When the choice is quid pro quo vs. refusal ($n = 51$), the effect of trust on choosing quid pro quo is not significant ($b = -0.69$, $SE = 0.58$, $z = -1.20$, $p = 0.23$).

These post hoc analyses support our emphasis on the obfuscation vs. refusal outcome variable throughout much of the rest of the paper.

¹ Quid pro quo vs. obfuscation is another potential combination of options, but in a separate exploratory analysis we found about 10% of participants objected via the free response text field to being limited to two options they found immoral.

Part G: Alternative moral discomfort measures

In Study 3, we used a moral discomfort mediator which is phrased, “I would feel highly uncomfortable asking the inspector for something unethical.” In this exploratory analysis, we collected new data similar to Study 3 but with two additional versions of the moral discomfort mediator included. One of them reads, “I would feel morally uncomfortable about my own action if I were to give the building inspector a personal consideration.” The other item was, “I would worry about putting the building inspector in an uncomfortable position if I were to give him a personal consideration.” The former was included to provide a stronger emphasis on the action rather than the ask. The latter was meant to explore the possibility that participants might primarily think about their discomfort of putting someone else in an unethical situation.

Using CloudResearch for participant recruitment and the procedures of Study 3, we collected a total of 50 responses for this supplementary analysis. First, results revealed that the three measurement items are closely related (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.77$). Second, we ran two additional mediation bootstrapping analyses in PROCESS (Preacher and Hayes 2004) while using the new mediator items, expecting to see a mediating pattern materialize for the first (focused on the participant’s own discomfort) but not for the second (focused on the participant’s discomfort about putting someone else in an unethical situation).

In the first of the two models (using the “I would feel morally uncomfortable about my own action if I were to give the building inspector a personal consideration” item), loyalty-based trustworthiness had a negative effect on moral discomfort ($b = -0.93$, $SE = 0.35$, $t = -2.69$, $p = 0.01$), and moral discomfort in turn was negatively related to choosing gift exchange over refusal ($b = -1.26$, $SE = 0.38$, $z = -3.30$, $p = 0.001$). Further, the 95%-*CI* of the indirect effect (two-tailed) did not straddle zero [0.26; 3.03], in support of mediation.

In contrast, in the second model (using the “I would worry about putting the building inspector in an uncomfortable position if I were to give him a personal consideration” item), there was no evidence for either the first-stage ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.42$, $t = -0.54$, $p = 0.59$) or the second-stage effect of the mediation model ($b = -0.23$, $SE = 0.21$, $z = -1.13$, $p = 0.26$). Likewise, the 95%-*CI* of the indirect effect contained zero [-0.13; 0.66].

These results provided further evidence for our position that the participant’s moral discomfort about engaging in an unethical action mediates the effect of loyalty-based trustworthiness on exchange structure choice.

Part H: Manipulation checks, study perceptions, and attention screeners

Table A1. Level-of-Trustworthiness Manipulation Check, Difficulty and Realism Ratings, and Attention Screeners for All 5 Studies

Study	Manipulation check: level of trustworthiness (Generally speaking, this building inspector is trustworthy) ¹	Study perception 1: complexity (The simulation was complex) ¹	Study perception 2: comprehensibility (The simulation was difficult to understand) ¹	Study perception 3: realism (The simulation felt realistic) ¹	Study perception 4: similarity to real world (Things actually happen in the real world that are similar to the simulation) ¹	Attention screener 1 (If you read this, please select strongly agree) ²	Attention screener 2 (What issue was the simulation about?) ³
1A	Low trustworthiness condition: $M = 1.76$ ($SD = 1.07$) High trustworthiness condition: $M = 4.16$ ($SD = 0.89$) Condition difference: Cohen's $d = -2.44$, $t = -13.69$, $p < 0.001$	$M = 2.94$ ($SD = 1.25$)	$M = 1.87$ ($SD = 1.00$)	$M = 3.81$ ($SD = 1.00$)	$M = 4.20$ ($SD = 0.83$)	97.6% of participants provided correct responses	96.8% of the participants provided correct responses
1B	Low trustworthiness condition: $M = 1.82$ ($SD = 1.09$) High trustworthiness condition: $M = 3.71$ ($SD = 1.30$) Condition difference: Cohen's $d = -1.58$, $t = -11.28$, $p < 0.001$	$M = 3.03$ ($SD = 1.31$)	$M = 1.85$ ($SD = 0.99$)	$M = 3.92$ ($SD = 0.89$)	$M = 4.25$ ($SD = 0.76$)	99.0% of participants provided correct responses	98.5% of participants provided correct responses

2	<p>Low trustworthiness condition: $M = 1.57$ ($SD = 0.89$)</p> <p>High trustworthiness condition: $M = 3.71$ ($SD = 1.12$)</p> <p>Condition difference: Cohen's $d = -2.13$, $t = -19.10$, $p < 0.001$</p>	$M = 3.07$ ($SD = 1.21$)	$M = 1.76$ ($SD = 0.84$)	$M = 3.74$ ($SD = 0.97$)	$M = 4.14$ ($SD = 0.78$)	98.8% of participants provided correct responses	100.0% of participants provided correct responses
3	<p>Low trustworthiness condition: $M = 1.69$ ($SD = 0.87$)</p> <p>High trustworthiness condition: $M = 3.75$ ($SD = 1.12$)</p> <p>Condition difference: Cohen's $d = -2.05$, $t = -18.94$, $p < 0.001$</p>	$M = 3.11$ ($SD = 1.24$)	$M = 1.75$ ($SD = 0.91$)	$M = 3.86$ ($SD = 0.90$)	$M = 4.23$ ($SD = 0.77$)	99.1% of participants provided correct responses	99.7% of participants provided correct responses
4	<p>Low trustworthiness condition: $M = 1.86$ ($SD = 0.99$)</p> <p>High trustworthiness condition: $M = 3.85$ ($SD = 1.11$)</p> <p>Condition difference: Cohen's $d = -1.90$, $t = -15.91$, $p < 0.001$</p>	$M = 2.81$ ($SD = 1.28$)	$M = 1.68$ ($SD = 0.90$)	$M = 3.80$ ($SD = 0.86$)	$M = 4.26$ ($SD = 0.73$)	100.0% of participants provided correct responses	98.2% of participants provided correct responses

Notes:

¹ This item was anchored on a five-point response scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (strongly agree”).

² This item was adapted from Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances (2014) and hidden among the four study-perception items.

³ The four response categories for this item were: corporate taxes, labor relations, building contracts, and climate change.

In addition to the inspector's trustworthiness, Study 1B also included a manipulation check for the mentor's trustworthiness ("Generally speaking, this mentor is trustworthy"), which allowed us to scrutinize whether we might have inadvertently manipulated the trustworthiness of the mentor. However, we did not find a significant difference in responses to the item across the (inspector's) *low*-trustworthiness condition ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.21$) and (inspector's) *high*-trustworthiness condition ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.21$), Cohen's $d = -0.08, t = -0.56, p = 0.57$.

Further, Study 4 included two additional manipulation checks. We measured *loyalty*-based trustworthiness using the item "I can rely on the building inspector" and *ethics*-based trustworthiness using the item "The building inspector has a strong sense of justice." There was a significant difference in perceived loyalty-based trustworthiness between participants in the low loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($M = 1.61, SD = 0.76$) and the high loyalty-based trustworthiness condition ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.24$), Cohen's $d = -1.83, t = -10.81, p < 0.001$. Similarly, there was a significant difference in perceived ethics-based trustworthiness between participants in the low ethics-based trustworthiness condition ($M = 1.97, SD = 0.96$) and the high ethics-based trustworthiness condition ($M = 4.35, SD = 0.92$), Cohen's $d = -2.52, t = -15.02, p < 0.001$.